

Message Text

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USCINCEUR VAIHINGEN GER

C O N F I D E N T I A L BEIRUT 7760

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: MILI, PINS, PINT, LE

SUBJECT: ANALYSIS OF RENEWED FIGHTING IN LEBANON

REF: BEIRUT 7747

1. WHO STARTED IT? THE LATEST OUTBREAK OF MAJOR FIGHTING IN LEBANON IS CLEARLY A SYRIAN INITIATIVE. ACCORDING TO SEVERAL SOURCES, THE MAJOR LEBANESE CHRISTIAN LEADERS WERE NOT INFORMED OF SYRIA'S INTENTIONS TO ATTACK AT THIS TIME UNTIL LESS THAN TWELVE HOURS BEFORE OFFENSIVE BEGAN, AND THE SYRIANS APPARENTLY DID NOT REQUEST ANY SPECIFIC CHRISTIAN PARTICIPATION. (HOWEVER, THERE HAS BEEN CLOSE COORDINATION OF OVERALL MILITARY STRATEGY BETWEEN CHRISTIANS AND SYRIANS FOR MONTHS AND CHRISTIANS WERE CERTAINLY NOT SURPRISED AT SYRIAN ATTACK.) IN FACT, SOME
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CHRISTIAN LEADERS, SUCH AS CAMILLE CHAMOUN, APPEAR TO

BE SOMEWHAT UNEASY AT THE PROSPECT OF HAVING THEIR SYRIAN "ALLIES" IN OCCUPATION OF THE METN STRONG POINTS NOW HELD BY THE PALESTINIANS, AND THE CHRISTIANS ARE MAKING MAJOR EFFORT TO ASSURE THAT THEIR FORCES, RATHER THAN SYRIANS, TAKE SUCH PLACES AS MTAYN.

2. WHY NOW? THERE ARE SEVERAL POSSIBLE EXPLANATIONS FOR SYRIA'S DECISION TO UNDERTAKE THIS MILITARY INITIATIVE. ONLY FIVE DAYS AFTER PRESIDENT SARKIS WAS INAUGURATED. ONE POPULAR EXPLANATION IS THE SEMIRAMIS HOTEL INCIDENT. ALTHOUGH IT IS HARD TO BELIEVE THAT ARAFAT WOULD HAVE INVOLVED HIMSELF IN SUCH A NO-WIN PROPOSITION AT THIS TIME, AND THAT ASAD REALLY BELIEVES THAT HE DID SO, IT IS NOT IMPOSSIBLE THAT ASAD, HAVING LOST PATIENCE WITH PALESTINIAN/ LEFTIST INTRANSIGENCE CONCERNING WITHDRAWAL FROM THE METN, DECIDED TO USE THIS INCIDENT AS AN EXCUSE TO TAKE IMMEDIATE ACTION WHICH HE BELIEVED HAD BECOME INEVITABLE. JUNBLATT'S ABSENCE IN CAIRO MAY ALSO HAVE ENCOURAGED SYRIANS TO MOVE, SINCE IT IS AN OPEN SECRET THAT HE FEELS MUCH MORE STRONGLY ABOUT KEEPING PALESTINIAN/ LEFTIST FORCES IN THE HIGH METN THAN MANY OF HIS PALESTINIAN ALLIES. FINALLY, AL REP AL-KHULI HAS SUGGESTED THAT SYRIA, UNWILLING TO ACCEPT ANY INTERFERENCE IN ITS LEBANESE POLICY BY OTHER ARAB COUNTRIES, TOOK THE INITIATIVE AT THIS TIME TO TORPEDO THE MINI-SUMMIT CONFERENCE WHICH HE SAYS WAS PLANNED DURING NEXT TWO DAYS.

3. PURPOSE OF SYRIAN INITIATIVE. ACCORDING TO AL-KHULI, SYRIANS TOLD CHRISTIANS THEY WERE MOVING AT THIS TIME TO ELIMINATE PALESTINIAN PRESENCE IN THE HIGH METN AND TO CLEAR THE ROAD BETWEEN ZAHLE AND HOUNIEH VIA AIN TOURA FOR USE THIS WINTER. THE THRUST OF THE SYRIAN OFFENSIVE IS SUCH THAT IT LEAVES MOST OF THE PALESTINIANS/LEFTISTS AT LEAST A TEMPORARY ESCAPE ROUTE VIA ALEY SHOULD THEY CHOOSE TO WITHDRAW. SYRIAN MAY ALSO HAVE DECIDED TO TAKE THIS INITIATIVE WITH MINIMUM ADVANCE NOTICE TO THEIR CHRISTIAN ALLIES SO THAT THEY, RATHER THAN CHRISTIANS, WOULD CONTROL

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MAXIMUM NUMBER OF STRATEGIC POINTS IN THE HIGH METN. IN ANY CASE, THE SYRIANS WILL WANT TO ACCOMPLISH THEIR OBJECTIVES QUICKLY, BEFORE THE EXPECTED ADVERSE INTERNATIONAL REACTION CAN SET IN.

(WHAT NOW? IT IS STILL TOO SOON TO TELL WHETHER SYRIAN MOVE IS LIMITED TO CLEARING PALESTINIANS FROM THE HIGH METN OR

IF IT HAS BROADER PURPOSES. ALMOST FROM THE BEGINNING OF THE OFFENSIVE, THE PALESTINIANS AND SYRIANS HAVE BEEN TALKING ABOUT A CEASE-FIRE, ALTHOUGH IT IS NOT CLEAR WHO MADE THE INITIAL SUGGESTION. A MEETING THAT WAS TO BE HELD AT 2200 LOCAL SEP 28 AT SOFAR WAS POSTPONED AND EFFORTS TO ARRANGE A MEETING FOR SEP 29 ARE STILL GOING ON. HOWEVER, EVEN IF THE SYRIAN GOAL IS LIMITED, THE CHRISTIANS, NOW THAT THE FIGHTING HAS BEGUN AGAIN IN EARNEST, MAY WISH TO TAKE TRIPOLI AND PERHAPS ADDITIONAL TERRITORY IN SOUTH LEBANON AND/OR THE BEIRUT AREA.

5. COMMENT: LATEST REPORTS SEP 29 INDICATE PALESTINIANS/LEFTISTS WILL SHORTLY BE DRIVEN OUT OF THEIR METN STRONG POINTS. (ACCORDING TO ONE REPORT, ARAFAT TELEPHONED JUNBLATT IN CAIRO EVENING OF SEP 28 AND TOLD HIM "WE HAVE NO CHOICE BUT TO WITHDRAW FROM THE MOUNTAINS.") IF SYRIANS AND CHRISTIANS ATTEMPT TO PRESS THEIR ADVANTAGE BY EXPANDING FIGHTING TO OTHER PARTS OF LEBANON, THE BATTLE WILL BE LONG AND BLOODY. PALESTINIANS HAVE FREQUENTLY SAID THEY HAVE NO PLACE ELSE TO GO AND MUST THEREFORE FIGHT TO THE LAST. ON OTHER HAND, IF SYRIANS/ CHRISTIANS RESTRICT THEMSELVES TO THE RECONQUEST OF THE HIGH METN, IT MAY IN FACT IMPROVE PROSPECTS FOR PEACE. THE OCCUPATION OF THIS AREA BY PALESTINIANS/LEFTISTS HAS LONG BEEN A BONE IN THE THROAT OF THE CHRISTIANS AND ONCE THEY REGAIN CONTROL THEY MAY BE WILLING TO CONSIDER A CEASE-FIRE. IF THE SYRIAN FORCES OCCUPY A MAJORITY OF THE STRONG POINTS IN THIS REGION AND REFUSE TO TURN THEM OVER TO THE CHRISTIAN FORCES, IT MAY ACTUALLY GIVE LEBANESE CHRISTIANS AND LEFTISTS

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SOMETHING IN COMMON -- A DESIRE TO SEE THE SYRIANS WITHDRAW.

6. SYRIAN ATTACK HAS PUT PRESIDENT SARKIS IN A DIFFICULT POSITION. THE LEBANESE LEFT HAS ALREADY ISSUED A STATEMENT CALLING ON HIM TO "TAKE A CLEAR STAND AND ASK FOR CESSATION OF SYRIAN AGGRESSION AND WITHDRAWAL OF THE SYRIAN ARMY FROM THE MOUNTAINS... PRESIDENT SARKIS EITHER TAKES THE NATIONALIST STAND THAT MAKES HIM PRESIDENT OF ALL THE LEBANESE, OR HE DRIFTS FINALLY TOWARD A POSITION THAT MAKES HIM PRESIDENT OF (ONLY) THE ISOLATIONIST GROUP." SO FAR, SARKIS HAS SAID NOTHING, ALTHOUGH L'ORIENT-LE JOUR SAYS HE HAS BEEN INVOLVED IN EFFORTS TO ARRANGE A CEASE-FIRE. IF THE SYRIAN/CHRISTIANS CAN COMPLETE

THE METN CAMPAIGN WITHIN TWO DAYS, HE MAY BE ABLE TO
MAINTAIN HIS SILENCE AND HIS POSITION AS THE HEALER,,
ABOVE THE BATTLE. IF THE FIGHTING DRAGS ON, HOWEVER,
HE MAY FIND HIMSELF FORCED TO MAKE A HOBSON'S CHOICE.
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